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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of intuition and applies its observations to the teaching of writing. As background, the distinction between instinct and intuition and a few common misunderstandings about intuition are discussed. The major portion of the paper identifies four intuitive senses: (1) The sense of the normative, which refers primarily to matters of tone--following this sense helps writers stay within the general range of reader tolerance bounded by the excessive and the boring at each extreme; (2) The sense of simplicity, which does not provide proscriptions like "avoid big words," but gives a sense of balance indicating the most economical means to achieve the highest return; (3) The sense of rhythm, which helps writers to produce readable prose without proscription--intuition is the basis for the rhythm of sentences as well as paragraphs and larger structural units in the essay; and (4) The sense of order, which is a complex process of shaping that reveals itself in the sequence, transitions, and proportions of a piece of writing. (CC)

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Acknowledging Intuition

William F. Irmscher

If we think of ourselves as writers, we know that the several hours we allot to writing a paper does not adequately account for all of the thought, anxiety, involvement, perhaps excitement, that has gone into its preparation. Mulling over a project can be productive, not because it leads anywhere immediately, but because it sets into motion a subconscious or preconscious activity that has a way of operating without our awareness of it. The result is often an idea or hunch or grasp that comes as an illumination--nothing necessarily revelatory, but an insight that comes with such suddenness that we are tempted to think of it as a reward for our obsessiveness. Intuition works that way.

We have all had the experience, I'm sure, of worrying a paper to a point of stagnation, only to abandon it in desperation and then find that the conscious mind has allowed the subconscious to solve the problem. The major limitation of this remarkable subconscious mechanism is that we seem not to be able to control it or to make it function when we think we need it most. As a result, we tend to be skeptical of intuition. We are uncertain of its exact functioning. We fail to agree on a definition of it. Yet scientists, philosophers, psychologists, and artists recognize intuition as a form of intelligent behavior. It plays an important and continuing role in the writing process.

What most of us recognize as the intuitive leap or intuitive grasp occurs in the prewriting, preparatory stage. It is the breakthrough; it produces the thought we need to start. But we do not consistently depend upon intuition in

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this pre-operational stage. It is an unexplainable heuristic. We are grateful when it occurs, but we do not rely on it.

Once we begin writing, however, we are constantly dependent upon intuition for the choices we make. Grammatical structure is primarily intuitional. I would advance that paragraphing is too. The kinds of choices we make about words, arrangement, and style are not rational choices in the same sense that we apply reason to evidence and argument. Composing is a process that calls constantly for spontaneous decisions--where a sentence is heading, where it has ended, where emphasis has or has not occurred, where the pace lags, where it would be better to scratch out and start over. These are intuitive decisions.

Looking at the revised manuscript of a well-known author--or even one of our own--gives us no idea of the constant decision-making that occurs as we write. Any changes we see were probably meditated upon, but the manuscript gives us no notion whatsoever of the infinite number of other decisions and rejections and alterations that never reach paper. Writing is of necessity intuitively directed; it would be impossible to act without intuition. This fact is so much taken for granted or so often ignored that it is seldom mentioned in texts on writing. It also explains why some individuals have little or no need for instruction. Their intuitive resources are equal to the tasks they set for themselves.

Intuition is a kind of built-in teacher. For this reason, some teachers by profession don't want to talk about it at all for fear that they will no longer have a role. Others don't know what to say. More numerous are those who want to use intuition as an excuse for doing nothing at all; after all, one can't give someone else intuitions. All of these positions are based on a misunderstanding of what intuition is and how it functions.

Since we often trivialize the word intuition when we use it in a phrase like "a woman's intuition," we are entitled to ask if intuition has legitimate status among specialists, if it is a mental faculty seriously recognized or whether it is only a word we popularly use to cover our ignorance of what we cannot otherwise explain. To be sure, many things remain unexplained about intuition, but it is an accepted human phenomenon, taken into account by theorists from Bergson to Bruner. Our purpose here is not to review the literature on the subject, but to identify those characteristics of intuitive perception that pertain to writing.

Consider two general definitions. E. Fischbein defines the term as follows: "An intuition is a stabilised action programme which is derived from experience, and which is effective because of its global, immediate, and flexible qualities."[1] Richard Guggenheimer describes the intuitive mind as a "rich fabric of subconscious wisdom. By subconscious wisdom," he goes on to say, "I mean chains of logically bound and evaluated perceptions stored in memory."[2] Both definitions suggest a storing or programming of selected and related perceptions drawn from experience, applicable to new situations.

What is important to emphasize here is that intuition and instinct are not one and the same. Intuition must be educated. The more we have experienced, studied, and reflected, the more likely we are to have spontaneous and sound intuitions in new situations. Ben Shahn makes the point succintly: "Intuition in art is actually the result of prolonged tuition."[3] Intuition begins with our responses to isolated incidents in experience and results in a cumulative and synthesized attitude or set of principles, internalized and structured, ready to affect future experience. It is a kind of personal

programming. Since it is strongly dependent upon observation, those who are sensitive to things about them, who see more and see better, are more likely to develop strong intuitions.

Intuition has a quality of immediacy; that is, it intervenes in moments of complexity to free us from the contradictions of rational thought. In this sense, it is one of the most practical resources we have, for we can act with a "feeling" that we have chosen rightly. The "feeling" has nothing to do with physical sensation, but rather with intuitive conviction. We ordinarily use the words "I feel" or "I believe" to suggest the interaction of thought and feeling that induces us to act. We never say or even write "I intuit that . . . ." Yet we have acted on the basis of intuition.

We can now apply several of these points to the teaching of writing:

1. If intuitions represent perceptions we accumulate, internalize, and synthesize into patterns, we should then expect those individuals with limited experience in language, either in speaking, writing, listening, or reading, to have limited intuitions about language and less spontaneity in being able to write because they lack conviction in the immediate decision-making process that writing represents. Struggling writers do not trust the faint intuitions they have. Many of them are afraid because they are insecure. They want answers in terms of rules and prescriptions, but these characteristically lack the "global, immediate, and flexible qualities" that Fischbein speaks of.

2. Intuitions can be developed, strengthened, and changed, depending upon the experience and responsiveness of the individual. Repetitions add to the coherence, stability, and efficiency of our intuitive resources, but they cannot be crammed in like the study of facts for a test. Thus, the importance of continued practice in writing.

3. Our intuitive conviction--our intuitive sense of rightness--is closely related to our aesthetic sense of values, for the synthesis that intuition represents is based upon a selection and evaluation of perceptions. Our values may be subjective, but they are not unfounded; they are related to what we know and feel about past experiences. Intuitions help to apply established values to new situations. Conflicting intuitions signal the need to do more, to examine further, and, in some cases, to solve a dilemma by reference to logic.

4. Becoming a more mature writer means essentially transcending skills by developing intuitions. Amateur writers depend upon prescriptions and rules for guidelines that mature writers sense intuitively. Teachers who attempt to reduce the process of writing to a science fail to take into account that intuitions are able to guide writers flexibly and efficiently. Science and the arts operate upon different premises. Applied science, although recognizing intuition, attempts to eliminate it as an unverifiable factor. The arts seeks to nourish it as a continuing source of creativity.

As we speak of intuition as a factor in writing, we should also anticipate a few common misunderstandings.

1. Saying intuitions should be developed and trusted is not the same as saying "do what comes naturally." One of the handicaps of remedial students is that their natural intuitions about language and writing often mislead them because they have not developed the patterns characteristic of the standard code of written English. If repetition reinforces principles and values that intuition draws upon, then we can see why many students have major difficulties overcoming the limitations of their home backgrounds, reading, and school training. They have not been subject to a gradual ac-

cumulation of intuitive resources that will allow them to be confident writers. We also have an explanation in part why most remedial courses fail to have a noticeable effect upon students. Such courses address surface features of writing that are not the major part of the problem.

2. Recognizing that most of the choices about arrangement and style in writing are intuitive does not mean that these choices should be left untested. Revision is often a process of getting beyond the immediate decision to view a word or sentence or passage in a larger context. A slightly different perspective, especially someone else's, alters our way of responding. Intuitions are in no sense infallible. The teacher's role as reader-critic is important. Yet many teachers recognize that there is such a thing as discouraging the intuitive impulses by too much criticism, just as many writers recognize that there is such a thing as killing a work by too strenuous revision, that is, by deadening all that was fresh and intuitively spontaneous about a first choice.

3. Saying that writing depends constantly upon intuitive choices does not limit the number of good writers to a talented few. On the contrary, it expands the number possible. Intuition is a normal mental faculty common to all human beings, obviously more developed in some than in others, but capable of being strengthened in all.

4. We know that intuitions can be formed without systematic instruction. The question arises whether systematic instruction can help. For the most part, teachers have given little attention to developing intuitions, or they have assumed that whatever goes on in the English classroom ought to help, often oblivious that some of the things they do are counter-intuitive. Oblique techniques--learning by indirection--are essential, especially in the teaching of writing. I believe in them. Yet many of our

indirect techniques fail because students fail to see their purpose. On a survey we give to writing students at the University of Washington, we ask them if they think the reading in the course--sometimes selections of fiction, drama, and poetry--helped to make their writing better. At least one-half say "no," and their answers may be quite accurate. But there is also the possibility that many of them do not recognize what has occurred in the learning process. To them, indirection clearly means no direction. One of the reasons for uncertainty about teaching composition, particularly if we want to place new emphasis upon intuition as an active part of the process, is that we don't even have names for the kinds of intuitive resources we are talking about here. In an attempt to supply a direction and focus for these efforts, I would like to propose a working vocabulary of four terms. I have identified each of them as a "sense"--an intuitive sense--individually acquired, but with a sufficient range of similarity in most individuals in our society that we can think of them as norms. They are cultural norms, for they are derived from our perception of the things about us. These norms will vary with time. They will change when enough people perceive with a different sense of values.

The first "sense" I would like to identify is our "sense of the normative." I use it to refer primarily to matters of tone in writing. Just as our ears tolerate a range of sound comfortably--neither too soft nor too loud--so also our intuitive sense of the normative has limits as well. In an article entitled "Up Against the Wall, Mother! The Rhetoric of Slogans, Catchphrases, and Graffiti," Frank D'Angelo quotes Mark Rudd writing about the strike at Columbia University in 1968: "Perhaps nothing upset our enemies more than this slogan. To them it seemed to show the extent to which

we had broken with their norms, how far we had sunk to brutality, hatred, and obscenity."[4]

If we wanted to define what Rudd means by "their norms," we would certainly have to include the restrained use of language. But we would have to go further. We would have to refer to respect for authority, propriety of actions (recall the picture of one student sitting in President Grayson Kirk's chair smoking one of the president's own cigars), appropriateness of dress--in fact, we would have to include an entire value system of one segment of society at that time as opposed to that of another. The words "Up against the wall, Mother!" symbolized the new value system that had broken the norms of the old.

Whatever is a norm in a particular society cannot be represented graphically as a single dot. It has to be a series of dots; that is, it has to be thought of as a range--a range representing degrees of tolerance among individuals, a range allowing for differences of temperament in people, a range recognizing economic, educational, and cultural variations--yet, significantly, a range of sufficient commonalty to represent what we refer to as the "prevailing tone," "the temper of the times," or "acceptable standards." As elusive as normative standards appear to be, they are there. They are the basis for our emotional responses to language and actions. Some things upset us by being excessive. Others bore us by being deficient. Either extreme exceeds our range of tolerance. Either extreme upsets our equilibrium. Either extreme "goes too far," as we commonly say. Our intuitive sense of the normative has been violated.

Writers concerned about being read and accepted have to concern themselves about normative reactions; that is, these writers have to operate

within the generalized range of tolerance. Writers who want to create a sensation, stir up feelings, or vent their anger can do so easily enough by adopting an extreme stance or by using language that seems prevailingly immoderate. Essentially, breaking the norm is an anti-rhetorical stance. It puts a barrier between reader and writer.

What is the mark of controversy? What is the measure of excess or deficiency? Essentially anything that exceeds our threshold of tolerance. Some people might want to talk of these matters in terms of a "sense of appropriateness," although appropriateness or suitability is not necessarily a matter of intuition. A number of obvious things can be proscribed: avoid obscenities at church gatherings, avoid pious phrases at pot parties, avoid frivolities on solemn occasions, avoid solemnities on lighthearted occasions. These are social commonplaces that hardly demand intuitive sensitivity. Yet there are other decisions about language of greater subtlety that taboos do not cover. What do we mean when we say someone overwrites? Or is too cute with language? Or pompous? We recognize these traits in others. Can we sense them in ourselves and in our own writing? How do we know when we or others are being patronizing or pretentious? Or jargonish? Or overly technical? These are all total effects that result not from the use of single words but from the combinations of words and structures, producing a tone that is in terms of the audience either "in tune" or "out of tune." Tone should be a subject for discussion in the classroom. We have to learn from others--not from the teacher alone--what is "out of tune," where a writer has slipped beyond the range of tolerance, where audience receptivity ends, when eccentricity becomes absurd, when flamboyance produces delight or disgust, how constant cautiousness becomes dullness, when disagreement becomes

hostility--whether these, in fact, are effects the writer intends. Talking about the limits of the range is a way of recognizing that a normative sense operates in the judgments we make. It is a way of informing intuition.

The second intuitive sense I would like to identify--the sense of simplicity--may very well be a subcategory of the first, but the overlap only means that one intuitive response is not separate and discrete from another, nor are particular senses limited to just one mode such as writing or music or dance. What we recognize as simple about a picture may not be basically different in principle from what is simple about writing or a melody or the facade of a building.

In writing, a certain kind of simplicity can be achieved by proscriptions that we are all familiar with: avoid big words, avoid foreign phrases, avoid coinages, avoid constructions with _there is_ and _there are_, avoid long sentences, and the list might be lengthened considerably. Like many proscriptions, these are often counter-intuitive. Further, too great an emphasis upon taboos causes some students to revert. If we create the idea that simplicity means merely syntactic plainness, then they will substitute primer sentences for structures more characteristic of mature writers. Clearly, simplicity does not mean childishness.

In _Simple & Direct_, Jacques Barzun writes as follows:

> Before discussing a number of tones encountered in the prose of today, I want to lay it down as an axiom that the best tone is the tone called plain, unaffected, unadorned. It does not talk down or jazz up; it assumes the equality of all readers likely to approach the given subject; it informs or argues without apologizing for its

> task; it does not try to dazzle or cajole the indifferent; it takes no posture of coziness or sophistication. It is the most difficult of all tones, and also the most adaptable.[5]

Clearly Barzun is talking about simplicity as a norm, something like the knob on a stereo set that indicates balance and then all degrees of volume and tone according to one's tastes. In these terms, our intuitive sense of simplicity is a sense that helps to keep us on balance. But how?

I would like to define simplicity as the most economical means that will yield the highest return. Economy in writing depends upon sharp perception (no fuzziness), unambiguous words, and unforced syntax. Ultimately, the test is not long or short sentences, but sentences that are clear and precise, without verbiage or contortions; not big words or little words, but words that are familiar and understandable. The enemy of simplicity is the thesaurus.

Barzun is undoubtedly right: the simple style is the most difficult to achieve, particularly if we bring into play a third sense: our sense of rhythm, one of the most important of our intuitive senses in producing readable prose and the sense least susceptible to either prescription or proscription. In fact, most books on writing say little or nothing about prose rhythm except to include a few things about alliteration, balanced structures, and placement of words for purposes of emphasis. Left undiscussed are terms like timing or pace or movement or proportion. Yet these are essential to prose rhythm, undoubtedly left unmentioned because they can hardly be talked about except in terms of an intuitive sense of rhythm.

Scattered attempts to treat prose rhythm as a teachable subject inevitably get around to scanning, as if prose were written in meter like verse. Scanning of prose in terms of traditional feet is consistently unsatisfactory because, while it may account for the memorableness or quotability of a particular phrase, it fails to account for the way writers write readable prose. Such writers seem to be listening to an inner drum. Rhythm is basic to all movement, whether our own or nature's--the wind swaying the trees or water lapping the shore. If we reflect upon various movements, we will become more consciously aware of the extent to which we are influenced by balance--one thing, then another; one thing against another in equal proportion.

The most extensive study of prose rhythm I know is a doctoral study by Regina Hoover based upon a computer study of approximately 90,000 words of nonfiction prose. Hoover proposes a principle of proportionate distribution in prose rhythm. Saying that English is basically an iambic language cannot be supported by her data. She suggests that we respond more spontaneously to a one-to-two distribution (one stress to two unstressed syllables) than to a one-to-one distribution (one stress to one unstressed). She resorts to metaphor to clarify: "Possibly one can better explain the sense of English rhythm by using the metaphor of a scale; the stressed syllable on one side must be balanced by more than one nonstressed syllable on the other. But because the stresses given to syllables are variable in our language, we can adjust to small variations; the ratio does not have to be exactly one-to-two."[6] What we seek in prose rhythm is a kind of rhythmic completion in the same way that we want chords to be resolved harmonically. In my own writing experience, I have never scanned sentences to get them "right," but

I have read them aloud, and I have read them silently with an awareness of an inner rhythmic sense that either approves or disapproves.

Once we accept an intuitive basis for the rhythm of sentences, it follows that a comparable principle of proportionate distribution operates in larger units as well. Paragraphing is a way of varying the pace and rhythm of an entire composition. An essay without rhythmic variation in its larger units grows tedious in the same way that sentences unvaried in their rhythmic patterns grow monotonous. Movement is more than an ordering of parts in a particular direction. That is a physical description of the way sentences and paragraphs look on the page. From within, movement is a rhythmic pattern, indivisible and continuous. Intuition perceives it as a whole, not as pieces patched together.

But can we also instruct this intuitive sense? Perhaps the most direct thing we can do is to encourage oral reading in the schools, not just of essays that students write, but of published essays by other writers. At the present, one of the most embarrassing things a college instructor can do in class is to ask a student to read a passage of prose aloud. In practically four cases out of five, the result is a hesitant, stumbling performance. Since I am not interested in humiliating students in this way, the alternative is simply not to ask anyone to read. Yet the connection between that kind of oral performance and an intuitive perception of rhythm ought to be obvious: there cannot be much feeling for the movement of language if someone has to stumble word by word through a passage.

Yet it must be conceded that many people who cannot read aloud satisfactorily do have an intuitive sense of rhythm. Again, these senses are not limited to particular modes. Swimmers, violinists, carpenters, and dancers are all caught up in rhythmic movements that are basic to their

success. More and more we need to make individuals aware that one part of their lives has connection with another part. Running and writing are not wholly separated. A track man needs to be convinced that he might apply the concept of pacing in long distance running to a prose composition. A singer who knows the stunning effect of a rest in music ought to appreciate the importance of juncture in writing. We categorize our activities to such an extent that we fail to see meaningful correspondences. Often students need only to be reminded of these analogues to make full use of their intuitive resources.

The kind of rhythmic wholeness I have been speaking of is also complemented by a fourth intuitive sense: our sense of order. It reveals itself in a number of different ways: first, in beginning (where is the appropriate starting point?), then, in sequence (what things naturally and logically follow one another?), in connection (what bridges are necessary to tie things together?), in dimension and proportion (how should the space be distributed among the parts?), and finally in closing (how do we recognize when we have come to the end of something?). This kind of listing of things we do intuitively indicates how complex the matter of ordering and shaping is. If we had to think of each of these steps in turn, we would flounder in the act of writing. But we don't. We write as if ordering were one function, just as we walk without thinking about every movement. Even though we as teachers at times focus upon parts of this total ordering --upon transitions, for instance--writers move through the whole process guided by their intuitive sense of order. Those who lack that grasp stumble along the way. They labor the beginning; they omit transitions because they lack a sense of continuity; they fail to recognize the imbalance of

parts because they lack a sense of proportion; they fail to recognize that they have not finished because they lack a sense of closure, a sense that tells us that the parts have or have not been molded together into a satisfying unit.

As human beings, we are not born with an innate sense of shape and structure. We don't begin with an inborn abstraction of form and order. As infants, we begin with tactile exploration and at more mature stages gradually begin to form concepts of mass and contour and depth and pattern. These become the intuitive basis of our sense of order. In an essay written in 1959, Freudenthal refers to the average man "whose intuitive space has been molded by our straight streets flanked by parallel walls, and by the experience of all those products of technology that suggest to him the validity of the Euclidean axioms."[7] In Western culture, our concept of order is closely tied to qualities of linearity and symmetricality. In terms of writing, what most of us recognize as logical is a one-directional sequence of thoughts with parts connected link by link to form continuous, successive discourse. If any of the links are missing, we dismiss the chain of reasoning as weak. A non sequitur is an illogical intrusion. Quite literally, "it does not follow" in terms of linear development.

Once we have acquired the structural model, we are able to function intuitively. Intuition is always a kind of faithfulness to our own insights. We need a fuller recognition of that fact to give individuals the kind of certainty they need to become confident writers.

The four intuitive senses I have separated here for purposes of discussion--a sense of the normative, a sense of simplicity, a sense of rhythm, and a sense of order--may represent complementations of one another. In

fact, I am certain that they are. Further, they combine to form the basis of our aesthetic faculty. They help to develop our sensitivity to qualities that please us. They define the values that give us a sense of well being. In the preface to Sight and Insight, Guggenheimer refers to the neglect of what he calls "aesthetic literacy."[8] Surely, a fuller awareness of our intuitive senses can act as a corrective to that form of neglect.

Recognizing the role of intuition in writing should not be thought of as an easy solution to the teaching problem. The hard fact remains that both teachers and students are distrustful of references to intuition. Teachers hesitate to talk about the undemonstrable. The result is that many things students are asked to do or told not to do are counter-intuitive. Students, not adequately recognizing that learning to write is mainly learning to trust themselves, look for solutions outside themselves. Surely any composition course ought to begin with a description or discussion of the kind of activity we are concerned with when we write. We cannot write with our heads and hands alone. We must be totally involved through our intuitions.

Footnotes

[1]E. Fischbein, The Intuitive Sources of Probabilistic Thinking in Children (Boston: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1975), p. 20.

[2]Creative Vision in Artist and Audience (New York: Harper, n.d.), p. 145.

[3]The Shape of Content (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 108.

[4]A Symposium in Rhetoric, ed. W. E. Tanner, J. D. Bishop, and T. S. Kobler (Denton, Texas: Committee for the Federation Degree Programs in English of the Federation of North Texas Area Universities, 1976), p. 41.

[5](New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 91.

[6]"Prose Rhythm: A Theory of Proportional Distribution," College Composition and Communication, 24 (Dec., 1973), p. 374.

[7]Quoted by Mario Bunge, Intuition and Science (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 64.

[8]Richard Guggenheimer, Sight and Insight: A Prediction of New Perceptions in Art (New York: Harper, 1945), p. viii.